

# HINCKLEY AND SON

BY THOMAS SZASZ

Ten years ago, in a well-planned and brilliantly executed attempt to murder Ronald Reagan, John Hinckley, Jr., shot the president, inflicted permanent brain damage on Press Secretary James Brady, injured two of the agents guarding the presidential entourage—and committed existential suicide. The anniversary of Hinckley's crimes was marked by agitation for the so-called Brady Bill, which would establish a national seven-day waiting period for the purchase of handguns. The fate of Hinckley himself was virtually ignored. Yet although Hinckley is as good as dead, his case demonstrates that psychiatry remains our society's most fearsome and most despicable instrument of punishment.

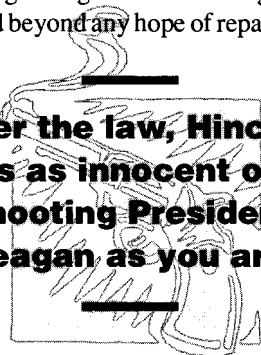
Ostensibly, Hinckley is the beneficiary of the best judicial and medical systems in the world. But let's not forget that Hinckley wanted to plead guilty to his crimes, was forced to plead insanity, and was "acquitted" against his will. Hence, because of the diabolical fictions of law and psychiatry, Hinckley is as innocent of shooting President Reagan as the readers of this column; his deed was not a crime but a symptom of illness; and he is not incarcerated in a prison but is treated in a hospital.

As the symptoms of pneumonia are cough and fever, so the symptoms of Hinckley's schizophrenia were buying a gun, loading it, locating President Reagan, taking good aim, and firing. Since Hinckley is sick, he is in a hospital. The fact that he cannot leave his doctors, just as Saddam Hussein's "guests" in Iraq could not leave their host, casts not the slightest doubt in the minds of many Americans on the validity of the psychiatric fiction that Hinckley is a "patient." Housed in the nation's premier madhouse, Hinckley must be receiving the best treatment for schizophrenia that American psychiatry has to offer. However, his disease must be difficult to treat, as he shows no sign of improvement.

Maybe Clozapine will cure him, though I doubt it. I think it is more likely that he will be discharged via the morgue.

Lest my argument be misunderstood as a defense of Hinckley, let me say that I consider him to be guilty of one of the gravest crimes in law, the attempted assassination of a head of state. He should have been tried, convicted, sentenced to death, and executed—or, perhaps, allowed to kill himself, which is what he wanted and had attempted but was prevented from doing. Perish the thought. After all, every educated person knows that Hinckley's desire to kill himself—expiating his guilt and ending a life wrecked beyond any hope of repair—was

**Under the law, Hinckley  
is as innocent of  
shooting President  
Reagan as you are.**



also a symptom of his schizophrenia. Indeed, thanks to the efforts of John Hinckley, Sr., and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (actually, the National Alliance for the Parents of the Mentally Ill), most Americans now also know that schizophrenia is a brain disease—indeed, "one of the most treatable" diseases. What is the treatment? Psychiatry's magic bullets: the so-called neuroleptic drugs.

The elder Hinckley's participation in his son's life, especially since the tragic events of March 1981, have raised psychiatric charlatanism to unprecedented heights of journalistic, judicial, and medical legitimacy. It was Hinckley père who, when his son experienced difficulties making the hazardous journey from adolescence to adulthood, chose to interpret the problem as a symptom of mental

illness, dispatched him to see a shrink, and thus pinned the ineradicable stigma of mental illness to his tail. This critical, initial psychiatric stigmatization had predictable consequences: The youngster's progress toward achieving the powers and privileges of adulthood was further obstructed. But not to worry. The cure was right at hand. It consisted of Valium dispensed by Hinckley père's psychiatrist to Hinckley fils.

After submitting to what everyone believed was the best medical treatment for his "illness," John Hinckley, Jr., proceeded to flunk life more dramatically than ever. But, smart kid that he was, he soon saw the handwriting on the wall and apparently decided to stop the charade: He decided (as I see it) to avenge himself against his father by bringing shame on his head and, at the same time, to end his own parasitic and pathetic existence. Everything worked as planned, except for one thing. The hail of bullets from the guns of Secret Service agents, in which he expected to die, did not materialize.

So Hinckley did the next best thing: After being taken into custody, he tried to kill himself. When that effort was thwarted, he wanted to be tried and to plead guilty to the crimes with which he had been charged. Hinckley, Sr., and his lawyers (who are always identified as his son's lawyers) foiled that effort, too.

I shed no tears for John W. Hinckley, Jr. But, to borrow from Thomas Jefferson, I do tremble for my country when I think that God is honest and will therefore not look kindly on a nation that classifies its lawbreakers as sick, its most fearsome prisons as hospitals, its psychiatric jailers as doctors, and some of its most toxic chemicals, forced by the "doctors" on their prisoners, as treatments for nonexistent diseases.

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